BURNING BUSH

LOUIS UNTERMEYER

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BURNING BUSH

Books by Louis Untermeyer

POETRY

ROAST LEVIATHAN
CHALLENGE
THE NEW ADAM
THESE TIMES
BURNING BUSH

PARODIES

INCLUDING HORACE
—AND OTHER POETS
HEAVENS
COLLECTED PARODIES

TALES

THE FAT OF THE CAT
AND OTHER STORIES

ESSAYS

AMERICAN POETRY SINCE 1900
THE FORMS OF POETRY

CRITICAL COLLECTIONS

MODERN AMERICAN POETRY
MODERN BRITISH POETRY
THIS SINGING WORLD
YESTERDAY AND TODAY
POEMS OF HEINRICH HEINE

LOUIS UNTERMEYER

BURNING BUSH

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1928

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FOR ALL THAT IS
RICHARD

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UNREASONING HEART

LONG FEUD

Where, without bloodshed, can there be
A more relentless enmity
Than the long feud fought silently

Between man and the growing grass.
Man's the aggressor, for he has
Weapons to humble and harass

The impudent spears that charge upon
His sacred privacy of lawn.
He mows them down, and they are gone

Only to lie in wait, although
He builds above and digs below
Where never a root would dare to go.

His are the triumphs till the day
There's no more grass to cut away,
And, weary of labor, weary of play,

Having exhausted every whim,
He stretches out each conquering limb.
And then the small grass covers him.

The brain forgets but the blood will remember.
There, when the play of sense is over,
The last, low spark in the darkest chamber
Will hold all there is of love and lover.

The war of words, the life-long quarrel
Of self against self will resolve into nothing;
Less than the chain of berry-red coral
Crying against the dead black of her clothing.

What has the brain that it hopes to last longer?
The blood will take from forgotten violence,
The groping, the break of her voice in anger.
There will be left only color and silence.

These will remain, these will go searching
Your veins for life when the flame of life smolders;
The night that you two saw the mountains marching
Up against dawn with the stars on their shoulders;

The jetting poplars' arrested fountains
As you drew her under them, easing her pain;
The notes, not the words, of a half-finished sentence;
The music, the silence. . . . These will remain.

SEA-GULL

Strong-winged bird, the one thing free and certain
In a waste of dubious water, buoyed up by nothing but air;
Long, slow curve, deliberate in your parting
Of mist from layers of mist, as though your pilgrimage were

Far, far off, in a world where space has no meaning
And the port is unknown and the sun has forgotten to rise—
On, on, you fly, nor faltering, nor straining;
Pitting your blunt white arrow against the grim bulk of the skies.

Night meets night, but blackness is not a barrier,
Only another element to trust the body to.
Strong-winged bird, whose atmosphere is terror,
My eyes—and only my eyes—can follow where you flew.

YET NOTHING LESS

This is the top. Here we can only go
Back to the world, that Lilliput below;
A child's toy village scattered in the snow.

What have we come for then? This scornful height
Scarce moved an inch to meet us. Black and white
Seem colder still in this ash-ivory light.

What saves these frozen trees from coming out
And waving threatening arms as though in doubt
Of what it is that we have come about?

What gives these common curves, these hills that part
As casually as schoolboys, power to start
Cries from the lips and tears within the heart?

Nothing so much, perhaps, yet nothing less
Than that which wintry earth knows to express:
Love that no longer lives on loveliness.

ANY SUNSET

There's something about the going down of the sun,
Whether it makes a bonfire of a cloud,
Or, too obscure and lonely to be proud,
Sinks on the nearest rooftop, and is gone.
There's something, not of color nor of size,
In the mere going, in the calm descent,
Half out of heaven and half imminent;
Final, as though it never again would rise.

There's something in its very noiselessness,
Unlike mad waters or the winds that shout
Their end in one last agony of excess;
Something that does not count its days nor deeds,
But trusts itself to darkness and goes out
And finds whatever after-life it needs.

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UNREASONING HEART

Here in a world whose heaven is powder-white,
Where, cased in glass, the branches bear a weight
Too light for leaves and far too cold for flowers,
Nothing disturbs these alabaster floors.
The black stream does not move; it is a vein
Of onyx cropping out, a metal vine
Twisted and thrown away. There is no sound.
Blankets of snow, curtains of snow-flake sand
Bury the footsteps of the one man here.
Here, where the world has died, away from her,
Here for the fevered mind too long harassed
Is wintry silence, cooling space and rest.
Waves of a soundless music rise to lift
The unburied thing that lived and even laughed.
And, as a broken life can be made whole
By looking at the slant of one long hill,
In this eternity of peace, the heart
Forgetting all forgets that it can hurt.

And yet, does even the weariest heart want peace?
Back to the fever, the intemperate pace,
Back to the ruthless word, the headlong deed
(Fearing that passion stilled is passion dead)
The worn heart hungers. Forever unappeased,
Forever self-persuaded, self-opposed,
It turns away from each escape, to pine
For the old wars and victories of pain;

Embracing all that reason hopes to leave,
With no less hurt and even greater love.
As though to cry, " Here I belong—I must!
Here is the place where I have suffered most."

THE DEBATE

HEAD:

And is this all? After the sundering
Of earth and heavens scattered everyway,
Only the voice of chaos: a lost thundering
That has no word to say?

Only the empty flesh, the hollow cinder
Dreaming of consummation, remembering flame?
Only defeat, only the forced surrender
Of reason in your name?

Only the gasp, the desperate invocation
Of a ghost, of an unseen idol, a chink in the wall?
A torch that burns with a deliberate passion
For darkness. And is that all?

And nothing left but doubt? Only the violent
Question that raises nothing, not even a clod?

HEART:

Be silent, head. Look back of the body. Be silent
And know that I am God.

SCARCELY SPRING

Nothing is real. The world has lost its edges;
The sky, uncovered, is the one thing clear.
The earth is little more than atmosphere
Where yesterday were rocks and naked ridges.
Nothing is fixed. Tentative rain dislodges
Green upon green or lifts a coral spear
That breaks in blossom, and the hills appear
Too frail to be the stony fruit of ages.

Nothing will keep. Even the heavens waver.
Young larks, whose first thought is to cry aloud,
Have spent their bubble notes. And here or there
A few slow-hearted boys and girls discover
A moon as insubstantial as a cloud
Painted by air on washed and watery air.

ALPINE

Man is the wonder. Baffled but undefeated,
He puts his mark however earth may slope.
Landslides plow under him. He is unseated,
Only to grope

Up the same scarps and gullies that betrayed him
Where rock still moves and struggles against rock;
A slipping foothold is enough to aid him.
Though wild goats mock

His long persistence, and his seed is granted
No ground but granite on the dizziest shelf,
There, where no brighter blossom can be planted,
He plants himself.

BURNING BUSH

And suddenly the flowing night stands still
  And the loose air grows tense and small;
Runners of flame from nowhere rise and fill
  The narrowest veins, till all

The martyrdom of fire is not enough
  For bodies eager to be doomed;
Burning in one long agony of love,
  Burning but not consumed.

And the last white blaze leaps from our being's core
  And flesh, too shaken to rejoice,
Cries out till quiet, vaster than before,
  Speaks in the still, small voice.

TO A TELEGRAPH POLE

You should be done with blossoming by now.
Yet here are leaves closer than any bough
That welcomes ivy. True, you were a tree
And stood with others in a marching line,
Less regular than this, of spruce and pine
And boasted branches rather than a trunk.
This is your final winter, all arms shrunk
To one cross-bar bearing haphazardly
Four rusty strands. You cannot hope to feel
The electric sap run through those veins of steel.
The birds know this; the birds have hoodwinked you,
Crowding about you as they used to do.
The rainy robins huddled on your wire
And those black birds with shoulders dipped in fire
Have made you dream these vines; these tendrils are
A last despair in green, familiar
To derelicts of earth as well as sea.
Do not believe them, there is mockery
In their cool little jets of song. They know
What everyone but you learned long ago:
The stream of stories humming through your head
Is not your own. You dream. But you are dead.

THE STONE'S HYMN

Earthquakes prepared me, made my bed;
  Worlds rose within me, fell apart.
Now small lives move beneath and overhead,
  While unseen heavens open in my heart.

Beyond extremities of pain,
  I touch the very source of might.
Do I not drink the warm, impersonal rain,
  Feed on the lavish and indifferent light?

Here, in a permanent peace, I lie
  Till finity and all its shapes are done;
And sorrow is an air that passes by
  And death a little absence of the sun.

Content to wait while kingdoms crack
  And men conspire and planets climb,
I know no fear, no weariness, no lack,
  Who have eternity instead of time.

QUESTION

Now what are you that, lacking you, this earth
Is but a lathe and plaster world, a lie
Of crumpled color on a canvas sky,
A winter-field, a home without a hearth?
Now what are you, indeed, that when you pass
Night is but twelve dark hours that none can praise,
And April is a month with thirty days,
And the first green is only so much grass?

And where are you, the heart cries loudest, where?
Where? And what power intangible, inert
Keeps you, in walls of air, so long, so still?
Come back! Come back! Or will you not repair
These sticks of earth, these broken days, until
The heart does not remember why it hurt?

ORIOLE

Suddenly earth grew whole.
I saw your soul
Rise with that oriole

Whose flame of passing stirred
Something no bird
Had ever seen or heard.

Something no ears nor eyes
Could quite surprise
Nor feathered fire disguise.

But whose clean color spoke
In light that woke
Laughter from deadened oak

And life from blackened fern,
Making things turn
To blaze that could not burn.

While every spark that flew
Took root and grew,
Leaf, stem and branch, like you

Altered, yet with the same
Power to frame
Green fire and golden flame.

THE WOODPECKER

In the world there were but two—
  She the sleeper, I the waker—
When upon our roof there flew
  An imperative woodpecker.

" What is that and who is there? "
  Cried my doubly dearest, waking.
" We are far and guests are rare
  And no stranger comes a-knocking."

Then I answered, " It may well
  Be the day of doom that wants us,
And perhaps it's Gabriel
  Making up an early census."

Then she laughed, " Belovèd, say,
  If he asks, I am not ready."
And the summoner flew away,
  And sleep took my tired lady.

I slept, too, though I could see
  A smaller house, a larger acre,
Where, one morning, we would be:
  I the sleeper, she the waker.

BUSINESS OF RAVENS

What are these ravens doing in our trees,
Calling on doom and outworn prophecies?
Flying in threes

Their sinister shadow, their funereal wing
Blots the fresh color out of everything.
They do not sing

Nor shake their throats like all the other birds;
But, in dry monotones or broken thirds,
Their crooked words

Cowardly and contemptuous are thrown
At scarecrows who, with business of their own,
Let them alone.

TEAM OF OXEN

This is earth moving, earth that learned to crawl
  Along the glacial wall;
Bowlders that rose in their deliberate way
  From the raw clay.

Not eagerly, nor yet prepared to know
  Where they are meant to go,
The damp soil dropping from their sides, they move
  In an uncertain groove

Thickly, but pressing on as though their bones
  Still feel the push of stones,
And fear to rest themselves lest they remain
  Dead earth again.

DOG AT NIGHT

At first he stirs uneasily in sleep
And, since the moon does not run off, unfolds
Protesting paws. Grumbling that he must keep
Both eyes awake, he whimpers; then he scolds
And, rising to his feet, demands to know
The stranger's business. You who break the dark
With insolent light, who are you? Where do you go?
But nothing answers his indignant bark.
The moon ignores him, walking on as though
Dogs never were. Stiffened to fury now,
His small hairs stand upright, his howls come fast,
And terrible to hear is the bow-wow
That tears the night. Stirred by this bugle-blast,
The farmer's bitch grows active; without pause
Summons her mastiff and the hound that lies
Three fields away to rally to the cause.
And the next county wakes. And miles beyond
Throats tear themselves and brassy lungs respond
With threats, entreaties, bellowings and cries,
Chasing the white intruder down the skies.

And once, in some swamp-forest, these,
My child, were trees.
Before the first fox thought to run,
These dead black chips were one
Green net to hold the sun
Each leaf in turn was taught the right
Way to drink light;
The twigs were made to learn
How to catch flame and yet not burn;
Branch and then bough began to eat
Their diet of heat.
And so for years, six million years (or higher)
They held that fire.

And here, out of the splinters that remain,
The fire is loose again.
See how its little hands reach here and there,
Finger the air;
Then, growing bolder, twisting free,
It fastens on the remnants of the tree
And, one by one,
Consumes them, mounts beyond them, leaps, is done,
And goes back to the sun.

CHILD DIGGING

Why do we dig? We neither think nor care.
Since the first child in the world's babyhood
Buried its fist in sand and found it good,
Scratchers of earth are busy everywhere.
A hole is wonderful; it lets you know
The secrets of a world that lie below
And come up piecemeal: shells that used to fly
On windy currents in a watery sky,
Red pebbles that were jewels long ago,
A prickly star, a barnacle, old wood
Smelling of pitch and pirates who may be
Walking the coral jungles of the sea.
How do we dig? As every builder should:
With stick or stone or anything that's planned
For scooping clay—the engine of our hand
Is mightier than any dynamo.
Where are we digging? To some buried land
Where soil is softer and our tunnels grow
Into a cave long as infinity.
Perhaps we'll dig the round world through and through;
Perhaps to Hindustan or Araby;
Perhaps to China. . . . What? What puzzles you?
Where are the Chinese children digging to?
Let us alone. We have our work to do.

DISENCHANTMENT

Here is the German
  Fairy forest;
And here I turn in,
  I, the poorest
Son of an aging
  Humble widow.
The light is fading;
  Every shadow
Conceals a kobold,
  A gnome's dark eye,
Or even some troubled
  Lorelei.
A ruined castle
  Invites me to prowl;
Its only vassal
  A frightened owl
(Most likely a princess
  Under a spell)—
And what light dances
  Behind that well?
Perhaps great riches
  Are hidden there,
Perhaps a witch's
  Magic snare.
I walk up boldly,
  Though my breath falters;
But no one holds me,

Nothing alters
Except the dying
Phosphorescence
Where the rocks lie in
Broken crescents.
These rocks are haunted
Everyone says,
And here the enchanted
Dragon obeys
Only the youngest
Son of a widow
Who waits the longest,
Fearing no shadow
Of any uncommon
Phantom in metal,
But dares to summon
The Thing to battle.
I've said my vespers,
I've tightened my gloves;
The forest whispers
And chuckles and moves.
Darker and closer
The stillness surges—
Not even the ghost of
A rabbit emerges.
I rattle my weapons,
I call and I call
But nothing happens,
Nothing at all.

Nothing at all.

VARIATIONS ON A CHILD'S GAME

Water, water, wine-flower
  Growing up so high;
We are all young ladies
  And all of us must die.

We are all young ladies
  Walking in the sun;
Soon there will be none of us
  For him to shine upon.

Comes a prince to choose a bride
  Never comes in vain.
Turn about and turn about
  And turn about again.

Comes a prince from Faraway
  Never speaks a word;
One hand holds the other hand
  Like a dead bird.

His horse's bones are ivory,
  Ebony and gold;
He will carry one of us
  Who never will be old.

He will name the one he loves,
  Take her to his side,
Touch her on the brow, and she
  Will have to be his bride.

Water, water, wine-flower,
Growing up so high;
We are all young ladies
And all of us must die.

BOY INTO FAUN

If I were a satyr,
Reshaped and reborn,
I'd put out goat-feet,
I'd put out a horn.

I'd stamp on the rock;
I'd charge at the oak;
I'd swing on a branch
Till it shivered and broke.

I'd try to lock horns
With the oncoming mist,
And I'd whimper because
It wouldn't resist.

I'd think of the wildest
Games to play.
I'd ring all the church-bells
And run away. . . .

I'd go back to the world.
But sometimes at dawn
I'd put out goat-feet,
Return to the faun.

AT THE BOTTOM OF THE WELL

Something befell
  Young Adam Hope
Who had a well
  For a telescope.

In which the stars
  Came crystal-clear,
Brighter than Mars
  Or Jupiter,

Till Adam scarcely
  Looked at the sky,
Strewn so sparsely,
  Stretched so high.

Night after night,
  The neighbors tell,
He put out the light,
  He stole to the well.

To that dark funnel
  He came to pray,
" If only the sun'll
  Stay away,

" And nothing occurs
  Until I finish,
One of those stars
  Will forget to vanish.

" And when that late one
  Loafs and lingers,
I'll catch a great one
  With my fingers."

Adam's aim
  Grew fixed and stronger.
Then one night came
  That lasted longer

Than nights should last
  By natural law;
And when it passed
  The neighbors saw

Something that glistened
  Deep in the well.
They looked; they listened
  They could not tell

The tale's conclusion.
  At the end of the rope
Was it Truth, or Illusion,
  Or Adam Hope?

FARM SAYING

Wind from the East
Will trouble you least.

Wind from the North
Will trumpet " Go forth! "

Wind from the South
Will leave you in drouth.

Wind from the West
Will put you to rest.

" This patch," they cried, " will yield
No better crop than stone."
And so they left the field
To mullein and the moon.

Its useless brook had dried,
Scorned even by the crow;
But when the mullein died
The moon began to plow.

He planted all his beams
Deep in a loamy ledge;
Then turned to simpler schemes
More suited to his age.

Still careless of neglect,
The seeds remembered him.
They pushed; they stood erect;
First in a disk of flame,

Then, in their sturdy right,
A host of ragged suns,
And last, those balls of light
More delicate than the moon's.

But still they were ignored,
Waiting from dusk to day,
As though the moon deplored
His natural progeny

Who, high above despair,
  Strained to rejoin the moon
Sliding through venturous air. . . .

One morning they were gone.

BERKSHIRE OCTOBER

" This is an avenue of gold
Impervious to rain and rust,
Where sunlight is a yellow dust
Too fine for all but leaves to hold;
When even the rocks return to mold,
These will resist Time's gradual thrust."
So we declared. And then a gust
From some far world blew suddenly cold.

The gold that powdered every tree
Was lightly loosened, flake by flake.
We watched the wind's sharp fingers take
Leaf after leaf deliberately.
Murder was out; death was awake.
There was no more we cared to see.

PATHETIC FALLACY

Where is the scholar
  Who knows how
The first wild poem
  Grew on a bough?

Not the pert goldfinch
  For all he can say,
Nor the loud phœbe
  Of almost May.

Least of all the catbird,
  Whose clever tone
Repeats every wisdom
  Except his own.

This much is certain:
  Once in a wood
I was stopped by a young, white
  Sisterhood.

I stared till my eyes were
  Too dazed to be focused.
Was this tree a virgin
  Changed to a locust?

Or dense wistaria
  At half-moon rise
Clustered in swarms of
  Butterflies?

They published themselves
  For the casual few;
Yet the more I observed
  The less I knew.

So I ask the scholars
  If they know how
To read a wild poem
  Hung on a bough?

SENTIMENTAL WIND

The wind among our trees
Is like no other wind.
Our birches, small and silver-skinned,
Maples and poplars—all of these
Translate in every rising note his little differences.

Contentment or despair?
And is the grief his own?
The watery words remain unknown,
Though every leaf reveals his snare
Of promising portentous things that end in thinning air.

Or is it just his play?
Or has he chanced to find
Something we may have left behind
And quite forgotten on the way,
Which he alone remembers but has never learned to say.

BIRTHDAY

I have nothing to give you
To remember me by
But the thought of a mountain
And a broken sky.

And the laugh that a waterfall
Made in the dark,
And the jargon of finches
That mimicked a lark.

And a road we discovered,
An unearthly hush,
And a dream that is rooted
In more than your flesh. . .

Some night you'll remember
And say, half asleep,
" He gave me no gift
But a mountain to keep."

RAINBOW'S END

" Do you remember at the rainbow's end
Those flowers trampled by the hurrying rain,
Hanging their heads, knowing they would not spend
Their prodigal colors again?

" Hanging their heads, you laughed, afraid to stare
Back at the boundless apathy of blue.
While arched above them in prismatic air
Their seven colors grew.

" And then, do you remember how you said
That every flower beaten to the ground
Blossoms in beds of light, and shook your head,
Half playful, half profound?

" And stóoped and picked two petals suddenly
And let them fall—do you remember—so . . .? "
I have forgotten. " And how you answered me?
How all the heaven flamed. . . Remember? " No.

OBITUARY

There was the world that Jackson always found
In sleep, a heaven of crime and lusty vices,
Where, swaggering in various disguises,
He killed, he conquered, and was always crowned.
And then there was the world where he was downed
By every small delay and hourly crisis;
A niggling world of customers and prices,
And reckoning the pennies to the pound.

Now who shall toll the bell for Jackson Parke
Who never lived his dream, nor here nor there.
Surely no demon of the outer dark,
For Jackson nightly offered up his prayer.
And who on earth will ever heed a clerk
Dangling, twixt heaven and hell, in pitiless air.

PETER PUTTER

They called him Peter Putter from the way
He had of doing nothing with the air
Of straightening up the universe. Somewhere
In youth a fortune fell on him. They say
His house with forty rooms above the bay,
" Built upon slipping sand," was the despair
And byword of the villagers. And there
Cleveland once stopped to pass the time of day.

Now Peter trims and tamps and mends the stairs
And pulls the burdock from his weedy lawn;
Content to come where any hole has gone,
Holding off time with pruning-shears and prayers.
And while he struggles with his small repairs,
The large decays eat unconcernedly on.

PUPIL OF LEIBNITZ

All of the teachers he had ever known,
All of the volumes given him to read
Taught him to smile. Smiling became his creed.
" Weep," they assured him, " and you weep alone."
So, with determined practice, he had grown
A mask to serve him in the hour of need
Against a world of bitterness and greed
Where hatred was engendered in the bone.

The hour never came. The world forgot
Himself and his pretensions, even while
He smashed his former gods, and grimly sought
Expressions that could wither and revile.
But no; it was too late. Leibnitz could not
Remove the mask that carved him to a smile.

MIDSUMMER SANITY

Leave me. The water that mumbles and drones in my ears,
To you is a laughter running its golden trebles;
For you the flood of night which confuses my fears
Is only a blue stream washing a skyful of pebbles.

Our lips meet. But there is no union—not even in dreams.
Deaf to the arrogant pulses, you hear nothing rude;
You hold your hands out to the fire because of the gleams;
Walking the world like a princess at home in her fairy wood.

There will be nothing, not even a trumpet, to shake you;
The walls of your castle will fall to the sigh of a flute.
The prince, in white satin, will always be coming to wake you;
For you there will only be beauty divorced from the brute.

Here, with your round, boyish head on my shoulder, it seems
That glow-worms can really be diamonds and every bright fly is a star.
Leave me—the fruit of my knowledge is less than your dreams.
My mind has been poisoned with truth. Oh, remain as you are.

ORDINARY MIRACLE

The baffled demons of our passion bore
Down in a clap of storm upon the beach.
Blood against blood had battled in our speech
As cruelly as only love can war.
Slashing with worse than swords, our anger tore
Through every cranny that its hate could reach,
Hurling its ugly blasphemies to breach
The last, white wall, the barred and secret door.

Silence came with the sunset. Suddenly
Our anger crumpled as the clouds gave way
Before a light that melted earth and sea
Into each other. Wordless, your hand lay
Healing in mine, asking no words of me.
The earth had spoken. There was no more to say.

MAD PROPOSAL

Dare to be a bather
  Where the sea is black;
Come and tear your hands to gather
  Rue upon the rock.

Where a red sun harries
  All it burns upon,
We shall eat the bitter berries
  Poisoned by the moon.

Some have all the highland's
  Laughing fortitude;
We have but the evil silence
  Heard in hostile woods.

Not for us the safer
  Roadway cut and cleared;
Lost in bogs, we plunge to braver
  Paths where none has dared.

For our body's fever
  No cool river runs,
We shall seek no bread while ever
  In this world are stones.

Stones to feed our hunger,
  Stones to make our bed;
These I offer, these last longer
  Than our earthly need.

Turn from peace, the barren
  Over-sweetened hearth,
Come with me and taste the iron
  Malice of the earth.

Rise and leave your father;
  Never dare look back.
Come and break your heart to gather
  Rue upon the rock.

THE DREAM AND THE BLOOD

Go back, dark blood, to the springs from which you came.
Go back, though each mutinous drop swells upward in flood.
What! Am I nothing more now than a wave of onrushing flame?
Nothing but sport of my pulse? Back, back, dark blood!

Am I not master here in my own house of flesh?
Cease roaring and rising. Be still, I tell you, be still.
I have work that calls for cool evenings; I have stuff of the mind to thresh.
Must you pit your unreasoning hunger against my determinate will?

I tell you this body for which we are always contending
Is more than mere fuel for you to be turned into ash.
It was shaped by white visions of leaving its bones, of extending
Itself into realms where your heat would be less than a flash.

What! Will you not even listen? I hear you, O hater
Of all that I plan. I hear how the thud
In my veins beats your victory. . . . Later, then, later.
Give me myself for an hour. Go back, dark blood.

AFTER

Here are the properties: a cankered rose
With rust, like stains of blood upon its petals;
A thin, smooth-beaten moon; a wind that blows
Only to spread the brunt of hopeless battles;

A wisp of early snow; a doubtful star,
Swift in its rise and swifter in its setting—
These are my funeral harmonies, these are
The pitch of loss, the accent of forgetting.

What mockery their music is to me,
Crying for what not even the mind remembers.
My spirit is not autumn's. Let me be
Tortured with living fire, not its embers.

There was a forest blazing in the sun,
Through which we laughed and ran, your dark hair waving. . .
But what is that to us? What's done is done.
Leave the dead clay. It is not worth the having.

NIGHTMARE BY DAY

There was no track
In the new snow.
Where could I go
Except go back
Where, row on row,
The trees stood black.

This, then, was peace.
Yet something said no.
Something below
The whispering trees
Made the warm flow
In my pulses freeze.

From where I stood,
Ten yards or so
Into the wood,
I watched it grow—
A trail of blood
Deep in the snow.

Nothing to show
Where it began.
No trace of man;
No other foe
More deadly than
One chuckling crow. . .

What was this dream?
I do not know.
But still I seem
To wait for the blow
And the red stream
Upon the snow.

AUTUMN DIALOGUE

" No, no," she cries, " I will not warm my fingers
At these charred sticks you long to huddle over.
Wait, if you like, to see if a spark still lingers;
I know the sort of ash you will discover."

" But look," he urges, " you who love to number
The gradual harmonies of dying color.
Have you no joy in such pale gold and amber?
Does gray mean nothing more to you now than dolor? "

" No, no," she answered, " it is you who relish
This dwindling death; you like to feel the smolder
Creep into words which, while you scrape and polish,
Make the thin air about us even colder."

Then he, " And what are yours but words that crumple
Their borrowed colors like those clouds at sunset
Which seemed more fixed than any earthly temple,
Yet turned to smoke before the first dark onset."

A stone grinds under her heel. He does not hold her.
The twig she snaps falls with a flaking of rust.
The moon shows an edge like the curve of a dead girl's
shoulder;
And earth continues to fondle its acre of dust.

ONE VOICE

This is your hour. Plum and freesia
  Wait till you speak for them. The light
Grows sultry, and a breath of Asia
  Sharpens the May-soft night.

Over the centuries of slaughter
  The breath moves, bearing fitfully,
Along a waste of bitter water
  Unsweetened by a tree,

The ageless cry of Jewish women
  Too steeped in suffering to be shrill,
Mixed with a laugh that fear and famine
  Tortured but could not kill.

Now the air turns. A dark wind tramples
  The singing dust until a voice
Calls on the stones of buried temples
  To answer and rejoice.

The music falters; hate in armor
  Beats black drums on a copper sky.
Death rides over the shaken murmur
  While its last echoes die.

But still the one voice triumphs, stronger
  Than all the suffering it endures.
It is a lost world's homeward hunger,
  And it is yours.

ESSAY ON MAN

Man longs to be merry,
  Though seldom elated.
Two bites of a cherry—
  His hunger is sated.
A fugitive pleasure
  Discloses what sin is.
Repentance at leisure. . .
  And then comes finis.

GLAD DAY

(After a Color Print by Blake)

Come day, glad day, day running out of the night
With breast aflame and your generous arms outspread;
With hands that scatter the dawn and fingers busy with light,
And a rainbow of fire to flicker about your head.

Come soon, glad day, come with the confident stride
Of the sun in its march over mountains, of the wind on its way through the air;
Naked and noble and new, throwing the darkness aside;
Come, with your gesture of space, and the heavens loosed in your hair.

For the waiting is lifeless, and dawn is a lingering doubt,
And our feet are confused in shadows that tangle and rend.
Come day, glad day, come with a wordless shout;
Clean with rejoicing, complete in outgiving, come day without end.

LOCAL HABITATIONS

COUNTRY EVENING

This is the time when birds no longer cry
  Haphazardly and high,
Nor dot the rails nor punctuate the trees
  In swift apostrophes.
This is the time day hesitates, as though
  It almost feared to go,
And the great span that promised to remain
  Goes back into thin rain.
And, doubtful of itself, night throws one spark
  To blaze the trail of dark;
And earth gives off cool breaths, green-growing smells,
  And something else
That lingers between light and atmosphere;
  And the third star swings clear.
This is the hour for lamps; this is the time
  For the slow, homeward climb.

POSITANO

Someone weary of the styles
  Architects must master,
Someone with a box of tiles
  And a pinch of plaster,

Some one who could never down
  The mad child in the poet,
Took his toys and built a town
  Whimsical, inchoate.

Like the prows of gaudy skiffs
  Roofs were tossed; he ran his
Houses up impossible cliffs
  And the craziest crannies.

Piled the town upon itself
  With a touch of mockery,
Till it seemed like shelf on shelf
  Of peasant crockery.

Roads to slip uphill he bent
  Rapidly in slow air,
Roads that crossed themselves, and went
  Neatly into nowhere.

Here a gate and there a wall,
  A church without a steeple;
Then, the maddest touch of all,
  He put in the people.

Seven hundred years ago—
  Tragic necromancy—
How could these poor creatures know
  They were just his fancy.

They began to love and cheat,
  Set up schools and utter
Platitudes in every street,
  Trade in bread and butter. . . .

Still the porcelain people go
  Gravely self-deceiving;
Still they walk the earth as though
  They were really living.

PAESTUM

Here where the Roman heel uprooted,
The lawless rose that grew too free,
The Saracen swept down and looted
Temple and town impartially.

Hundreds of years it watched, unharried,
The moss at work, lizards at play,
Till Robert Guiscard came and carried
All that a man can carry away.

All—save some yellow, fungus-eaten
Columns too scarred by sun and sand.
Intent on stone less weather-beaten,
These he contemptuously let stand.

And still they stand, these blocks that no man
Disturbed through thieving centuries;
Stones that, forgetting Turk and Roman,
Remember only what it is

That rears upon the earth a purity
Hands cannot raze nor mind make less:
The abstract form which finds security
Perfect in time and timelessness.

LITTLE VESUVIUS

What were we sure of? Earth? It heaved and bubbled
  While the sea was an empty pavement of stone;
And the feet of the wind on the water troubled
  Only the heart too lightly blown.

What did we trust? The stars? They shook and guttered
  In vacant air that suddenly let one fall.
And our thoughts, the things most trusted, the easiest scattered,
  Could not even rest in the mind that had fixed them all.

HIGH MASS AT ST. PETER'S

While the scarlet runs to song
And the twelve-foot candle drips,
Sculptured popes regard the throng
Stonily with half-curled lips.

And the ritual is a whirl
Of barbarian brocade
In a wilderness of pearl,
Lapis lazuli and jade;

And the living flowers are tossed
Innocently out of place;
And the skirted priests are lost
In a fine-edged sea of lace;

And Saint Peter, bronze and gold,
High above the lesser thrones,
Sits in marble, aureoled
In a blaze of precious stones.

. . . . . .

Peter cast his net and drew
The guide lines straight.
The day was gone, the fish were few,
The need was great.

Peter heard a voice that lets
No man be.
Peter rose and left his nets
At Galilee.

IN THE MAMERTINE PRISON

(II Timothy 4:6–7)

And all night long the wild beasts roared behind him,
  And, daily, he could hear the long applause
Of wilder beasts whose pleasure had consigned him
  To Rome's convenient laws.

A year shrugged by. The applauding world was Nero's;
  The prisoner's world remained unlistening stones.
His body, never shaped to be a hero's,
  Bent down upon its bones.

Two years. Disciples turned away. He suffered
  Doubt that was even colder than neglect.
He waited. He was ready to be offered.
  He wrote. He stood erect. . . .

And Nero, longing for an hour's resistance
  Entered the Circus, talkative and light.
" What food for lions! Bah! These spineless Christians.
  Not one of them will fight."

DOOMSDAY AT WEGGIS

When Gabriel came to Weggis that last morning
They thought it was the postman with the papers,
And no one noticed him and his forewarning
Except old Franz who, friendlier than the neighbors,
Hailed him with " Grüss Gott " and resumed his plowing.
The rest were far too occupied with haying
Or pulling beets or scrubbing floors or sewing
To stop and hear what Gabriel was saying.
" Prepare! " he called, his urgency grown greater,
" Doomsday! Doomsday! Doomsday! " But no one heeded
(They had no time for trivial news till later),
No one. He cupped his hands. He railed. He pleaded.
He roared until his holy features reddened,
Crying to rouse the dead. . . . Then he succeeded.
The dogs of Switzerland, like one dog maddened,
Flew at his heels and snapped, till Gabriel straightway
(His errand done, his message given) departed
In uncelestial haste behind the gateway.
By now ten thousand spectral throats were started,
And out of moldy barns and bones unburied
Came ghostly howls and yammerings and bellows.
And not one voice but broke its leash and hurried
To spread the hideous rumor to its fellows,
Who, knowing tales more terrible, grew jealous
And answered back, and bayed, and whined, and worried,
Barking the frightened echoes up the hill.

Since then, no dog in Weggis has been still.

TOWARD THE KULM

What is there in a mountain
  To lift the heart high?
Nothing but earth that stretches
  Into a dangerous sky,
Nothing but bowlders balanced
  In reckless masonry.

Nothing to heal the spirit
  But a cloud in retarded flight,
A hemmed-in path that struggles
  To reach unshadowed light.
Nothing but space and silence
  And height that calls to height.

ASH WEDNESDAY

(*Vienna*)

I

Shut out the light or let it filter through
These frowning aisles as penitentially
As though it walked in sackcloth. Let it be
Laid at the feet of all that ever grew
Twisted and false, like this rococo shrine
Where cupids smirk from candy clouds and where
The Lord, with polished nails and perfumed hair,
Performs a parody of the divine.

The candles hiss; the organ-pedals storm;
Writhing and dark, the columns leave the earth
To find a lonelier and darker height.
The church grows dingy while the human swarm
Struggles against the impenitent body's mirth.
Ashes to ashes. . . . Go. . . . Shut out the light.

(*Hinterbrühl*)

II

And so the light runs laughing from the town,
Pulling the sun with him along the roads
That shed their muddy rivers as he goads
Each blade of grass the ice had flattened down.
At every empty bush he stops to fling
Handfuls of birds with green and yellow throats;
While even the hens, uncertain of their notes,
Stir rusty vowels in attempts to sing.

He daubs the chestnut-tips with sudden reds
And throws an olive blush on naked hills
That hoped, somehow, to keep themselves in white.
Who calls for sackcloth now? He leaps and spreads
A carnival of color, gladly spills
His blood: the resurrection—and the light.

SCHUBERT AT HÖLDRICHSMÜHLE

These mountains seem to hold themselves so high
Because they think to keep his secret still.
But so does every little scrubby hill
And path that had to stretch to let him by.
Romantic to the last, the vineyards sigh
A placid summer sigh, and even the mill
Allows itself a reminiscent thrill,
Gazing upon a sentimental sky.

And there he sat, drinking the country beer,
Placing these dots on paper, while his friends
Made the trite jokes about the war and weather.
Good-humored chaff, a round or two. . . .
And here,
Ascending in a cry that never ends,
Thunder and lark sing radiantly together.

IMPERIAL AIRWAYS

(*London–Paris*)

Black above the world
It flies
Like an anger
In the skies.

Seven years it cursed
The light;
Horror of a
Nameless night.

Now the triple engine
Roars;
And travelers (as a
Matter of course)

Eat their lunch and
Do not see
The earth's involved
Geometry.

To them the world below
Is some
Pattern of
Linoleum

To watch an hour or so
With eyes
Dead to distance
Or surprise,

Save (turning to their papers)
When
They read
The franc has fallen again.

SHANTY BROOK

(*For Jim and Bess*)

Here where the last long hill withdraws
Into a monotone of gauze
And night and day is nothing else
But an arrangement of pastels,
Where the discarded trout-stream goes
To chatter with the arguing crows,
All that the world is waiting for
Comes, like a wild thing, to your door.

Each lisping poplar bears good news
And even the most reticent spruce
Has more to say. Conviction grows
Out of the quiet ground that knows
How pure, above a roaring age,
Your thought has made this hermitage
Where the bound foot is free to roam
And homelessness can be at home.

PROGRESSIVE RUIN

Pollius desires a gateway
  For his villa. . . . And the block
Lifts a stolid flank and straightway
  Rises humbly from the rock.

Lombardy demands a cloister
  To commemorate a saint. . . .
And the rock that knows its master
  Wears a brighter coat of paint.

Borgia plans a garden growing
  Out of stone, an ancient grot. . . .
And the rock obliges, knowing
  Times may change but time does not.

Naples calls for more efficient
  Pavement and for smoother stones. . . .
And the shifted rock is patient,
  Turning on its tireless bones.

Earth grows skyward; earth grows prouder;
  Earth grows more inclined to mock.
Then, one day, a fine, thin powder. . . .
  And the rock returns to rock.

SIX BOOK REVIEWS

CRITIQUE OF PURE RHYME

Finished and flawless,
  Crisply designed,
Here is the aweless
  Breath of the mind.
Light without glamor
  Illumines this world;
Chisel and hammer
  Shape all these curled
Odorless petals,
  Keen, cutting fronds,
Into bright metals
  Harder than bronze.
Thin as old glass
  Still undemolished,
Even the grass
  Is painted and polished,
Spun out and waved,
  Carefully counted,
Lacquered, engraved,
  And finally mounted
With so many millions
  Of jewels for color
That even the brilliance
  Grows duller and duller.
Rhyme, like a shutter,
  Claps through the words.

Mechanical birds
  Woodenly flutter.
Clouds of pale cardboard
  Creak through the sky;
While with a hard, bored
  Baffled eye,
We turn from these mobile
  Toys that are offered,
Seeking a noble
  Phrase that has suffered.
But in this airless
  Vacuum
Nothing so careless
  Can ever come.
Never a burden,
  A cry or a curse,
Can hope to be heard in
  This crackling verse.
Its one endeavor
  Is to be smooth;
Hard and clever,
  Its highest truth.
Without a blunder,
  It stiffens and dies—
What might have been wonder
  Is scarcely surprise.

A SONNET SEQUENCE

Here Rhetoric in tatters beats its breast,
And calls upon the bugles to intone
Pompous profundities that have been blown
By countless other trumpets, long at rest.
Here Eloquence is but an actor, dressed
In faded fustian on a tinsel throne,
Mouthing his climax: "Oh thou . . . great . . . alone . . .
Vast . . . immemorial . . . Beauty . . . unexpressed."

And while the sound disturbs indifferent air,
Invoking Glamour in its grandiose moods,
The summoned spirit enters; blare on blare
Ushers in Old Solemnity, while broods
Of hoary metaphors reveal him there
In patches torn from purple platitudes.

A VOLUME OF LYRICS

With a voice as cool and plain
As a blackbird's after rain,
On a slender spray of tone,
Arch immensities are thrown.

Sorrow sprawling through the street
Is a catch for tinkling feet;
Love and pain are words that pass
Like rhymed shadows on the grass.

Passion executes a bright
Endless pirouette, as light
As suffering whose accents make
The mind glad that the heart can break.

Life, with a complacent smile,
Chirps a bird-like measure, while
Even Death is taught to go
To the tune of heel-and-toe.

Never was landscape quite so clipped and callow
As this between these pale bucolic covers;
On these smooth lawns the water-color lovers
Stray through the copse where kine and crocus follow.
And elms—elms lonely, leaning, haunted, hollow—
Are packed with thrushes, wrens and wheeling plovers
As, over every sprig of thyme, there hovers
At least one curlew or nostalgic swallow.

Here, far beyond the reach of life or trams,
A world composed of ever-verdant vales
Is thick with adjectives and thrice-told tales,
Blackbirds and buttercups and gentle dams;
While, from the hawthorn, immemorial lambs
Keep moonlit trysts with deathless nightingales.

"WORDS, WORDS, WORDS"

O, will there be no stop to men parading
Their every pang and turning blood to ink?
Can no one have a grief without degrading
Sorrow with syntax, no one even think
A casual thought without the wish to blazon
In four-inch rhetoric the weakest verb?
Can no one dream or climb a hill or gaze on
A sunset and not wish to write a blurb?

Come, let us put an end to publishing;
Burn up the galleys and melt down the plates.
Destroy the type and turn from everything
That deals with marketable loves and hates.
Adam survived unparadisal winters
Without the aid of paper, press or printers.

SONG TOURNAMENT: NEW STYLE

Rain, said the first, as it falls in Venice
Is like the dropping of golden pennies
Into a sea as smooth and bright
As a bowl of curdled malachite.

Storm, sang the next, in the streets of Peking
Is like the ghost of a yellow sea-king,
Scooping the dust to find if he may
Discover what earth has hidden away.

The mist, sighed the third, that lies on London
Is the wraith of Beauty, betrayed and undone
By a world of dark machines that plan
To splinter the shaken soul of man.

The rush of Spring, smiled the fourth, in Florence
Is wave upon wave of laughing torrents,
A flood of birds, a water-voiced calling,
A green rain rising instead of falling.

The wind, cried the fifth, in the Bay of Naples
Is a quarrel of leaves among the maples,
A war of sunbeams idly fanned,
A whisper softer than sand on sand.

Then spoke the last: God's endless tears,
Too great for Heaven, anoint the spheres,

While every drop becomes a well
In the fathomless, thirsting heart of Hell.

And thus six bards, who could boast of travel
Fifty miles from their native gravel,
Rose in the sunlight and offered their stanzas
At the shrine of the Poetry Contest in Kansas.

APOCRYPHAL SOLILOQUIES

GOLIATH AND DAVID

GOLIATH

See the dazzled stripling stand,
Naked as an empty hand.
And here am I, a clanking mass
Blotting out the yellow grass
With a body only sent
For the world's astonishment:
Arms as great as monstrous boughs
Where no bird would dare to house,
Fingers like some poisonous growth
Even jungle-beasts must loathe,
And a goggling head awry
Like a black moon in the sky. . .
Here I wait, uneagerly
For the child that faces me,
Frightened by my length of limb—
And the clean, young grace of him
Unaware that cheek and brow
Taste their last of sunlight now.
Oh, that it were I, not he!
Oh, that God would take from me
This power only schooled in harm
And send it through that puny arm
With such a fire that it might well
Break through this hugely rotting shell. . .
But there will be no miracle.

There is no help. Young David, fly!
I am destruction's demon, aye,
Too sick to live, too strong to die.

DAVID

And there he looms, no more defiant
Than any hill. So that's a giant!
This is the thing that should alarm me
More than the sight of hell's own army
Commanded by its master devil.
But this—why this is nothing evil!
Its eyes are cow's eyes, it looks civil,
A thing that only babes could fear.
Yet I—what am I doing here?
What part have I, the least of shepherds,
Among these hungry spears and scabbards?
What! Have I tended sheep and cattle
Only to lead the wolves to battle?
Am I possessed of howling demons
That I should seek the blood of humans?
God, take this madness out of me.
Give me my pastures, let me be—
Far from this clash of words and weapons—
Where nothing cries and little happens
Save when a star leaps from the heavens
Or a new rush of song enlivens
The heart that beats in balanced measures,
Unshaken by more passionate seizures.

See, I will fling this silly pebble
Away from me to end my trouble
And pluck harp-strings again till they
Charm every darker thought away. . .
Come, old Goliath, come and play!

CAIN

O Man that would
Be molded anew,
Obey the blood
That burns for you.

When the flame roars,
Too long oppressed,
I am the force
Within your fist.

White as a young boy's
Indignation,
I am the passion
In your voice.

Upon the hordes
Fattened in sloth,
I bring the Lord's
Most righteous wrath.

For what I was
And what I am
Springs from a cause
Too bright for blame.

Against a world
Of unctuous Abels,
My sons are hurled,
A race of rebels.

Never will they
Cringe to the rulers;
They will make play
Of kingdoms and dollars.

No ground too sacred;
No wall too stout;
But, with an acrid
Laugh in the throat,

Still will they surge
Within the temple,
Swinging an ample
Whip for a scourge,

Though the world pleases
To press again
On the bow of Jesus
The brand of Cain.

ISAAC

Will it be always nightmare, always fever,
Now and hereafter?
Will nothing stop the currents running ever
Darker and swifter?

Let me forget. . . . It happened in my boyhood.
We rose up early,
Saddled the ass, took fire, and split the gray wood.
The dawn broke clearly.

Two days of level roads. And then toward sunset,
The country differing,
We piled the resinous wood before night's onset
For a burnt offering.

And he, my patriarch father, knelt beside me;
His face was graver
In the long shadows. And a fear betrayed me
Then and forever.

And into arms too mighty to be shaken
I ran for shelter. . .
The ropes were knotted. I lay bound and stricken
Upon the altar.

I watched a little flame run up and onward.
I saw him gather
All power in one body. A knife flashed downward.
It was my father.

. . . . . .

Will it be always nightmare, always fever,
Now and hereafter?
Will nothing stop the currents running ever
Darker and swifter?

KOHELETH

I waited and worked
  To win myself leisure,
Till loneliness irked
  And I turned to raw pleasure.

I drank and I gamed,
  I feasted and wasted,
Till, sick and ashamed,
  The food stood untasted.

I searched in the Book
  For rooted convictions,
Till the badgered brain shook
  With its own contradictions.

Then, done with the speech,
  Of the foolishly lettered,
I started to teach
  Life cannot be bettered:

That the warrior fails
  Whatever his weapon,
And nothing avails
  While time and chance happen.

That fools who assure men
  With lies are respected,
While the vision of pure men
  Is scorned and rejected.

That a wise man goes grieving
  Even in Zion,
While any dog living
  Outroars a dead lion.

HOLOFERNES

I have seen God at last; have seen him stand
Naked, a burning woman, from whose hand,
Still shaped for love, destruction spoke. . . .
Now I
Who fought Death off the field, am glad to die.
This is completion; this is what I thought
To find beneath all passion, this I sought
In women—women eager, casual, bought—
And never found. To die upon the breast
Of pain and cleave the world in one deep thrust,
Spending the last drop till there's no more giving.
But where was that fulfilment for my craving?
Always I faltered backward from the gulf,
Too much in love with self to give myself
Completely to the depths beyond all saving.
But now, now in the midst of fear and famine,
Plenty—and peace. This dark and secret woman
Has brought release beyond all hope or human
Sharing of flesh. And I, the unbeliever,
Hail Death, the last denial, as my saviour.
Peace after passion. . . Slow surrender. . . Rest. . .
The washing of great tides within my breast. . .

Hands off, you fools, you cannot hold Death fast!
Let Judith go. I have seen God at last.

JEWISH LULLABY

Husha, O husha,
  And lull-lullaby;
No mother in Russia
  Is prouder than I.
You stumble no longer,
  Soon you will run,
And you will grow stronger
  Than Samson, my son.

You will be famous,
  Your thoughts will go wide;
Isaiah and Amos
  Will walk at your side.
Your words will be graven
  On metal and stone;
And the Great Ones in Heaven
  Will envy my son.

"BURNING BUSH" HAS BEEN DESIGNED BY ROBERT S. JOSEPHY; THE FRONTISPIECE DRAWN BY ROCKWELL KENT.

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